A
ter nearly two decades of reform, Vietnam today enjoys relatively fast and steady economic growth. Increasingly liberal social, cultural, and environmental economies are conducive to integration into the world economy, encourage foreign direct investment, and allow citizens to move both within and beyond national borders. All induce further economic growth and improvement in the Vietnamese standard of living. However, an apparent, less-desired effect of the market economy in Vietnam is the improvement in the Vietnamese standard of living. However, Koh demonstrates how an awareness of this dynamic has been driving the VCP leadership to improve the efficiency and accountability of the party and its top-ranking personnel in order to satisfy popular demands for good governance and consolidate the regime’s legitimacy. At the same time, as governance is increasingly meritocratised, political capital will gradually lose its value, especially in enabling people to attain elite jobs, tap into limited resources and accumulate power and wealth. However, as Jee Young Kim indicates later in her chapter, under the current conditions of the market economy in Vietnam, it is not yet clear whether social, political or human capital will be the most important in enabling people to gain opportunities. In a chapter focusing on a small ethnic Muong village, Tran Thi Thi Trang asserts that those who possess social and political power continue to excel economically, widening the economic gap among villagers.

Other chapters collectively proffer a multifaceted depiction of issues and realities of social differentiation and disparities among social groups and across regions and locales. Stefanie Scott and Truong Thi Kim Chuyen demonstrate that despite recent poverty reduction programmes, the disparities between urban and rural, and between ethnic and non-ethnic, groups, and between agricultural and non-agricultural sectors have all increased. Nonetheless, while socio-economic differentiation can potentially cause conflict between regions and between ethnic groups, it opens up opportunities for increased inter-regional interactions (for example, through migration) and development initiatives. Vu Quoc Ngoc and Philip Taylor draw attention to institutional interventions and local people’s actions to redress specific aspects of inequality. Be it the improvement of living conditions, educational attainment, or access to land and infrastructure, state policies and development agencies do not always bring the intended results. Often, local people’s actions and initiatives are more effective. Underlying this is the problem of assumption: state and development agencies assume a loose definition of ‘poverty’ and impose poverty reduction policies that do not always suit local circumstances. A lack of connection to a locality in formulating and implementing policies, exacerbated by poor performance and corruption on the part of local officials, might result in a lack of support, discontent and even violent protests from local residents, as Nguyen Van Suu demonstrates in his chapter. Even in contemporary literature, the gap between agents of development and their ideals on the one hand and realities of peasant life on the other are clearly evident. Mon- tira Rato argues that the reason for this gap is that writers are often urban-based, middle-class and detached from the peasant way of life.

Another form of social inequality in present-day market-orient ed Vietnam is unequal access to consumption and recreation, which express aspirations for higher social status and confirm its attainment. The two chapters by Ngkiem Lien Huong and Catherine Earl, respectively, demonstrate that whether it is rural young women drawn to Hanoi to work in garment factories or educated migrant women in Ho Chi Minh City, they all have in common a liking for fashionable clothes, cosmetics, and a desire for leisurely urban lifestyles. Created by the popular media, the image of the urban woman who can afford recreation and travel is both attractive and impressive; hence many women and/or their families are prepared to put their resources into attaining and showing it off.

Although the uneven and inconsistent use of section headings throughout this volume gives it the appearance of a rushed compilation of presentations straight from the 2003 Vietnam Update conference, this collection of papers makes a useful and stimulating read for researchers and anyone interested in present-day Vietnam. Significantly, it also calls attention to the need for further, more coherent and comprehensive research on the dynamics of social inequality and consequent social phenomena, such as class formation, in a globalising Vietnam.